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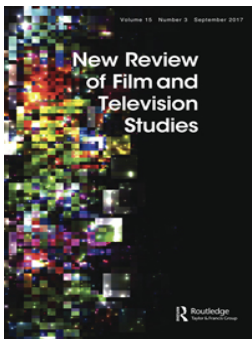
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There's something about Malick: film-philosophy, contemplative style, and ethics of transformation

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ABSTRACT

Philosophers love to write about Terrence Malick. In this meta-critical essay, I examine recent philosophical evaluations of Malick's film style – within the broader context of 'film as philosophy' or 'film-philosophy' – with the aim of laying bare the dominant motifs and values that film philosophers resort to when reflecting on the filmmaker's pronounced stylistic hallmarks. First, I identify Malick's widely perceived 'contemplative style' as a key catalyst behind philosophers' fascination with his films and proceed to detail the diversity of stylistic devices and effects in terms of which philosophers describe it. The second movement of my analysis is to illustrate the decidedly ethical interests that accompany said configurations of Malick's style and effects. I argue that Malick magnifies in philosophers a motive of personal transformation that is more widely at work within the project of film-philosophy. The philosophical achievements of Malick's style, as commentators see it, always entail transformational effects on the viewer: his devices not only move us to contemplation, but potentially transform us to greater awareness, openness and connection. What are essentially value-laden interpretations of style are illustrated with reference to the three stylistic elements that feature most in philosophical writings on Malick: (1) his visual renderings of nature, (2) his uses of voice-over and (3) the 'perspective effects' that he is said to achieve. I conclude with some critical implications of my findings for the procedures and presuppositions underlying the project of film-philosophy.

KEYWORDS Terrence Malick; film-philosophy; film style; contemplation; ethics; personal transformation

'I've got style!' – a prelude

Philosophers love to write about Terrence Malick.¹ Their eagerness to write about the filmmaker is perhaps only exceeded by an equally devoted horde of Malick haters on the web. Yet every now and then these two camps exhibit a

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surprising convergence of interests. It is for this reason that a customer review of *The New World* (2005) caught my attention:

This has got to be one of the most boring movies ever made... I could just picture the director of this awful abortion of cinema sitting with a self-satisfied smile on his face, saying 'Who needs dialogue or a story? I can put in random images of rocks and trees for 2 and a half hours instead! Who needs substance? I've got style!'. (*Amazon Review* by Jonathan Joneson, 24 May 2006)

So *why are philosophers so fascinated by Malick?* As I aim to show, one major source of this fascination – and of some viewers' frustration, evidently – is the often overwhelming pre-eminence of Malick's distinctive *style*. Malick continues to be a mainstay of philosophers' attempts at marrying film and philosophy; and recent appraisals of Malick's work, especially, make issues of 'style' or 'form' – for lack of more precise terms – of key importance to this pursuit.

While I am aware of the potential difficulties raised by the term, by 'style' I simply wish to capture a general shift in philosophers' focus, which is now much less concerned with (often Heidegger inspired) narrative-thematic readings of Malick's films.² Instead, a lot of attention is now given to the potential philosophical virtues that reside in the distinctive cinematic *techniques* and *designs* that Malick presents his audience with. This shift seems to express a more general urge in the 'film as philosophy' debate to formulate how films can do philosophy in 'uniquely cinematic' ways: it is a matter of 'getting beyond thematics and taking seriously the look and sound of his films', as Richard Neer (2011) puts it, and thereby avoid reducing Malick's work to 'its most comfortably 'literary' elements'.

No doubt Malick also entices this shift, inasmuch his style is so obvious, abundant, even excessive. If, like the reviewer cited above, we understand 'style' as particular pictorial and sonic expressions of narrative 'substance', it can be said that Malick's stylistic hallmarks tend to have *a life of their own*. Whether interjections of nature imagery, streams of voice-over reflections or a camera wandering where it wishes, these elements often have little narrative motivation or typically stand in ambiguous relation to events that occur on screen. Philosophers, therefore, cannot really avoid Malick's style. And for many commentators this is precisely the point: the philosophical substance of Malick's films *is* his style.

But to say that the philosophical attraction of Malick's work lies in his style does not, of course, resolve the issue: what, then, about Malick's *style* makes it so inviting to philosophers – especially those engaged in the project of theorizing how films can do philosophy? What *value* could they possibly find in things like 'random images of rocks and trees'?

'Going meta' on Malick, and the project of film-philosophy

So that much is clear: for philosophers there's *something* about Malick. But to ask what that something is, and brings about, is to pose what I take to be much needed *meta-theoretical* questions about the ever-growing endeavour of approaching film as a form of philosophy. And what better case can there be? Whenever the philosophical establishment bestows badges for emblematic 'philosophical films', it is Malick's oeuvre that most often leads the pack (cf. Sinnerbrink 2011a, 180; Neer 2011; Rybin 2012, xiv).³

Let me be clear, then, that my aim here is to reflect, not on Terrence Malick's films in themselves, but on what *philosophers* make of them. I lay bare the interpretations and values that philosophers resort to when dealing with his style. My own stance therefore remains a strictly meta-analytic one.⁴

My analysis consists of two movements. The first is to establish what particular quality of Malick's cinema makes it so appealing to philosophers. By taking my cue from the philosophers themselves, I deem this quality to be their recurring interest in the 'contemplative' nature of Malick's style, a quality that holds clear attraction for the idea of philosophy through film. Yet as much as philosophers share this sentiment about Malick's contemplativeness, they provide a smorgasbord of differing explanations for it. This is not to deny that there is a distinctly contemplative quality to Malick's work. But rather than join the bandwagon – tempting as it is – I try to take a step back, and chart the medley of existing reasons given for the filmmaker's contemplative style.

The second movement of my analysis is to illustrate a particular interpretative inclination of philosophers, which I take to be spurred by the dominant perception of a contemplative style in Malick. My claim is that philosophical assessments of Malick's style exhibit a patent motive of *personal transformation*. This ethical interest becomes clear when we trace the kind of value that philosophers assign to his 'contemplative' hallmarks. The philosophical relevance of Malick's style, commentators routinely intimate, goes hand in hand with its ethically significant effects on the viewer: his films not only move us to contemplation, but potentially *transform* us to greater awareness, openness and connection. Again, I do not wish to suggest that this ethical inclination has nothing to do with Malick – certainly the contents of both his films, and his much publicized philosophical persona, help constitute a value horizon that encourages interest in transformational ethics. But the ethical conclusions that philosophers reach about Malick, I maintain, tells us just as much – if not more – about the project and pre-interpretive interests of film-philosophy itself. Most of the readings that I examine here belong to the field, or theoretical project, variously called 'film-philosophy', 'film as philosophy' or 'cinematic thinking'.⁵ And the case of Malick demonstrates that there's something – a few things, really – about the broader enterprise of approaching film as philosophy that deserve critical attention. In addition to raising methodological questions about

interpreting style, my meta-analysis of Malick's philosophical reception puts under the magnifying glass the extent to which film-philosophy is an ethically vested, value-laden exercise. The project of film-philosophy not only values film for the end of doing philosophy, but also for the special ethical end of self-transformation, in concert with that of philosophy. Whenever philosophers say that films quote-unquote 'do philosophy' or 'think' in a cinematic way, there is always the added suggestion of the *practical* benefits that this encounter may hold: our thoughts can be renewed, our senses sharpened, our experience of the world transfigured. This is not surprising, after all, since the practice of 'philosophy' – understood in a broader, not strictly academic sense – brings into play intrinsic transformational aims and effects, which have been deemed part and parcel of *philosophia*, ever since its ancient inceptions. But the point is that, for film philosophers, the 'philosophizing film' stakes a special claim in this ethical motive intrinsic to philosophy: cinematic enactments of philosophy augment philosophy's existing transformational appeal and thus provide viewers a distinctive means to personal transformation. What is essentially an ethical validation of film-philosophy – valuing films that do philosophy for doing transformative things to us – is nowhere more clear than in the case of Malick. It is my contention that, by virtue of his particular contemplative appeal, hard to pin down as it may be, Malick *amplifies* what is a much broader transformational ideal at work within the film as philosophy project.

Contemplative style, philosophy, transformation

Let us begin with how philosophers approach Malick's style. The philosophical appeal of Malick's style, I propose, has a lot to do with what is time and again identified as the '*contemplative*' nature of his films. Malick's expositors have settled into a steady lexicon for detailing his distinctive appeal. We have grown accustomed to descriptions of his cinema as 'poetic', 'lyrical', 'romantic', 'visionary', 'mythical' or even 'metaphysical'.⁶ Yet virtually any appraisal of his work, whether philosophical or film critical, also includes observations of *reflective*, *ruminative*, and *meditative* qualities in Malick's style. While this feature may have received less attention than others, film philosophers have latched onto it with enthusiasm. Not to be outdone for lyricism, they typically speak of Malick's 'contemplative reverie' (Rybin 2011, 34), 'meditative film-thinking' (Frampton 2006, 193), 'mesmerizing philosophical meditation' (Sinnerbrink 2011b, 180) and even suggest that he exacts a certain 'prayerfulness' (Pippin 2013, 274). Such philosophical formulations of Malick's 'contemplative style', as I label it, goes as far back as Stanley Cavell, who linked Malick's films to Heidegger's meditations of Being and thought that Malick himself had found in film a way to transpose 'thoughts for our meditation' (1979, xv).

Of what interest is this view of Malick's style to the idea of 'film as philosophy'? A style that viewers experience as 'contemplative' – however you want to

construe it – presents itself an attractive invitation for philosopher–theorists to explore the nature of thought *in, through* or *of* film. Since philosophy involves acts of contemplation, the connection between contemplative style and philosophy is, quite understandably, one that is easily drawn. I find that philosophers are therefore keen to use a ‘contemplative cinema’, such as Malick’s, as a testing ground for the premise that films can enact uniquely cinematic forms of philosophical reflection. (Of course, this proposition is made all the more alluring by the great deal of mythologizing around the figure of ‘Terrence Malick’, and particularly his status as ‘ex-philosopher’. This is evident from how other ‘contemplative’ filmmakers, the likes of Yasujiro Ozu, Andrei Tarkovsky, or Hou Hsiao-hsien, have not garnered the amount of attention from philosophers that Malick has.)

Some qualifications are in order. Seeing that the notion of ‘contemplation’, clearly, entails different kinds of subjective acts and procedures, I must assume a corresponding plurality of different possible ‘contemplative styles’. Think of the obvious stylistic differences, for example, between Malick’s work and contemporary ‘slow cinema’, a film movement that is likewise associated with ‘contemplative’ aspirations.⁷ Also, I use the notion of Malick’s contemplative style in a deliberately general way. Each of Malick’s films exhibits singular qualities that cannot be covered by this blanket characterization. It may well be, therefore, that some of Malick’s films have specific contemplative modalities that are absent in others, which raises the question whether even Malick himself may have more than one contemplative style. But these concessions do not rule out a more general conception of Malick’s contemplative style. I recognize, as many commentators do, that Malick displays pronounced stylistic hallmarks that persist throughout his filmmaking career. Moreover, his work has evolved in a manner that makes these hallmarks increasingly clear. The ‘late Malick’⁸ has increasingly pursued the kind of abstraction that exposes the devices most essential to his style. He seems evermore intent on ‘distilling his appeal to its most rudimentary elements’ which, according to one account, includes ‘whispery voiceover narration, roaming camerawork and an unending collage of lush images (Kohn 2015)’. This increasing distillation of his style is so palpable that some critics have described Malick’s more recent efforts – *To the Wonder* (2012) and *Knight of Cups* (2015) – as exercises in self-parody (e.g. Bradshaw 2012; Kohn 2015).

So to what stylistic elements, according to Malick’s philosophical audience, do we attribute the oft-cited *contemplative-philosophical appeal* of his films? Relevant literature presents us with a range of likely candidates; and any one philosophical reading of Malick usually addresses more than one of these elements at a time. I therefore find it useful to structure this survey around a basic distinction between *stylistic devices* (concrete filmic techniques) and *stylistic effects* (kinds of experiences associated with a device). On the more concrete

level of stylistic devices, firstly, commentators typically identify Malick's contemplative style with the following elements, roughly in order of salience:

- *Photography of landscape and nature*: Critchley (2005); Silberman (2007); Davies (2008b); Sinnerbrink (2011b); Rybin (2011, 14–18); Tucker (2011); Walden (2011, 206–209); Lehtimäki (2012); and Pippin (2013).
- *First person voice-over monologues*: Polan (2004, 273–274); Bersani and Dutoit (2004, 124–178); Davies (2008b, 57–62); Kendall (2011, 150); Rybin (2011); Pippin (2013); and Virvidaki (2014).
- *Juxtapositions of image and sound*: Bersani and Dutoit (2004, 124–178); Chion (2004, 12–13); Polan (2004, 273–274); Davies (2008b, 57–62); Plantinga (2010); Kendall (2011, 149–152); Neer (2011); Rybin (2011); Walden (2011, 197); Pippin (2013); and Virvidaki (2014).
- *Discontinuous editing*: Chion (2004, 12–13); Polan (2004, 272); Davies (2009, 573–574); Rybin (2011, 15); and Pippin (2013, 250, 269).
- *Repetition of devices*: Bersani and Dutoit (2004, 151–153); Macdonald (2008, 90–98); Kendall (2011, 161–162); Neer (2011); and Sinnerbrink (2011b, 191–192).
- *Music*: Clewis (2006, 29); Kendall (2011, 150, 163); Neer (2011); and Sinnerbrink (2011b, 187–192).
- *Camera movement*: Coplan (2008, 75–79); Rybin (2011, 17–18); and Virvidaki (2014, 30–31).
- *Episodic, elliptical narrative*: Martin (2006); Coplan (2008, 70–74); and Kendall (2011, 152).

Philosophers connect the above stylistic *devices* with a variety of less concrete stylistic *effects*. The connection is not always clear, since commentators are prone to conflate stylistic devices with the experiential effects that they attribute to them. But there is no getting away from the two distinct dimensions of style that are at stake in their evaluations: analysts propose different profiles of stylistic *effects* by deriving them from a particular selection and interpretation of stylistic *devices*. In fact, the general claim that Malick's style is 'contemplative' is itself a global, higher-order *effect* that commentators, in turn, derive from whatever intermediary stylistic effects they detect.

My rough rubric of possible stylistic effects ranges from local perceptual or cognitive effects to the overall aesthetic effects that analysts may detect. I shall not try to order or hierarchize them here. When it comes to Malick, philosophers typically emphasize the following stylistic effects:

- 'Elliptical', 'fragmented' or 'impressionistic' aesthetic qualities: Coplan (2008, 70–74); Rybin (2011); and Antunes (2014).
- Experiences of 'incongruity', 'ambiguity' or 'disorientation': Bersani and Dutoit (2004); Polan (2004, 274); Coplan (2008, 71); Davies (2008b, 48–49,

- 59–60); Plantinga (2010); Kendall (2011); Neer (2011); Rybin (2011, 25, 37–38); Walden (2011, 197); Pippin (2013); and Virvidaki (2014, 27).
- ‘Questioning’ or ‘interrogative’ modes of presentation: Furstenau and MacAvoy (2007); and Pippin (2013, 269–272).
 - Experiences of ‘awe’, ‘wonder’ or ‘sublimity’: Clewis (2006); Silberman (2007, 170–175); Sinnerbrink (2011b); Pippin (2013); and Virvidaki (2014, 29).
 - Expressions of ‘perspectives’, ‘points of view’ or ‘ways of seeing’: Bersani and Dutoit (2004, 158–178); Yates (2006); Davies (2008b, 50–56); Macdonald (2008); Manning (2011); Sinnerbrink (2011b); Walden (2011); Pippin (2013, 273, 275); and Virvidaki (2014, 29–31).

To get to the crux of how philosophers interpret Malick’s style – to trace the philosophical and ethical value that they attach it – is mostly a matter of getting clear about the *stylistic effects* that they identify. My reasoning is as follows. Firstly, it is mostly the perceived stylistic effects that show us what exactly the analyst understands by the ‘contemplative’ nature of the style. The notion is of course a highly pliable one: so the respective effects of being ‘impressionistic’, raising ‘ambiguity’ and evoking ‘wonder’, for example, entail quite different notions of how the films are ‘contemplative’ and, thereby, of what philosophical use they are.

Secondly, different stylistic effects suggest different forms of contemplative engagements of the viewer. The philosophers who approach Malick’s films as philosophy constantly resort to the assumption that his contemplative style draws the viewer into a reciprocating posture of philosophical contemplation. In short: Malick’s contemplative *style* is thought to do a certain contemplative *work*, meaning that it elicits from the viewer a related process of reflection or conscious experience. But, again, this work may be construed as having to deal with the ‘impressionistic’, the ‘ambiguous’ or the ‘wonderful’ – each of which implies a different contemplative procedure on the part of the viewer.

Thirdly and lastly, it is this contemplative work that is time and again suggested to also have *ethically significant effects* on the viewer. The various contemplative effects of Malick’s style, as philosophers see it, can establish for viewers a *contemplative mode* of self-transformation; the supposed contemplative work of the style thus facilitates ethical work on the self. To be sure, Malick’s expositors envision this contemplative posturing of the viewer in different ways, as they rely on differently construed ensembles of stylistic devices and -effects. Each such configuration therefore represents a distinct *contemplative method*, on the part of the film, whereby Malick’s cinematic style is understood to enlist and guide the viewer’s contemplations to some end of personal transformation – whether an enhanced state of contemplation, concentration or the like.

Transformational ethics of contemplative style: three cases

Let us now examine in closer detail the ethical notions that emerge in philosophical appraisals of Malick's contemplative style. I streamline my meta-analysis around the three stylistic elements that, I find, are most prominent in philosophical writing on the filmmaker. They are (1) Malick's visual depictions of nature, (2) his uses of voice-over and (3) effects of perspective. For practical reasons, I limit my inquiry to what may be called Malick's two 'mid-career' films, *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and *The New World* (2005), which have by far attracted the most explicitly *philosophical* commentary and analysis.

These three cases bring me to the second movement of my analysis, which is to indicate how philosophers frame elements of style in terms of the *transformational effects* that they afford. What I am essentially after is the implicit *ethic* of transformation that any given analyst proposes. By 'transformational ethic', I refer to a formulation of how the human ideal of personal transformation (i.e. changing the self to some desired state) can be achieved. It is 'ethical' insofar it communicates some understanding of value or 'the good' – which includes not only 'the good' of personal transformation, in general, but also the selected ideals that variously define what the nature of that transformation must be. A transformational ethic of film style – as the philosophers below are inclined to convey – accords a valued transformative agency to particular stylistic features and thereby implies that film can aid the viewer's ethical intentions towards self.

The implicit transformational ethics of film philosophers can be elaborated along a few interrelated lines. In what follows, I foreground three dimensions: the *method* whereby Malick's films are suggested to elicit a contemplative mode of transformation; the personal *domain* upon which the transformation is said to be exercised (e.g. thoughts, attention, affects, perceptions or 'ways of seeing') and the posited transformational *value* that is thereby realized (e.g. attention, openness or connection).

Visual presentations of nature and landscape

It comes as no surprise, firstly, that Malick's photography of nature and landscape is frequently singled out as essential to his philosophical appeal. Many, if not most, accounts of Malick's style coalesce around the filmmaker's enduring fascination with nature.

Simon Critchley: Calm in the presence of nature. Critchley's (2005) well-known reading of *The Thin Red Line*, an early and influential exemplar of contemporary film-philosophy, is a good place to start. He argues that the metaphysical issues raised in the film are framed and answered by a pervasive 'experience of calm', which he sees as the key to Malick's art. This, clearly, is an interpreted stylistic effect. And Critchley largely bases this effect on stylistic devices that put *nature* on display. He notes, for example, the 'beautiful

indifference' of the nature imagery that repeatedly punctuates human drama and suffering. In Malick's visual presentation, Critchley describes, 'one has the sense of things simply being looked at, just being what they are – trees, water, birds, dogs, crocodiles or whatever. Things simply are, and are not moulded to a human purpose' (ibid., 147). But the apparent philosophical appeal of this calm, impassive nature is as much a transformational one: Critchley finds that the film's calmness also 'becomes the mood' of Malick's audience:

There is a calm at the heart of Malick's art, a calmness to his cinematic eye, a calmness that is also communicated by his films, that *becomes the mood of his audience*: after watching *The Thin Red Line* we feel calm [emphasis added] (ibid.).

In this way, Critchley poses a transformational relevance for nature-related devices: they exercise a transformation within the *domains* of affect and emotion, as the 'experience of calm', their supposed effect, prefigures the state of calmness that the viewer attains. Yet this claimed affective state seems to suggest a deeper ethical terminal: the normative *ideal* or *value* in question here is a transformation toward *openness* (see Sinnerbrink, 2006: 33–34). This is in the sense that the 'neverthelessness' of nature, as rendered by the film, is understood to prompt an ethical posture of *acceptance* and *letting things be*.

Robert Silberman: Nature as a challenge to imagination. Robert Silberman (2007), unlike Critchley, detects a great deal more *enchantment* in the nature of Malick's nature. It is perhaps because of this that Silberman envisages a different domain for the device's transformative work – not that of affective response, but instead the viewer's *imagination*.

Silberman argues that representations of nature and landscape in *The Thin Red Line* is the main device through which Malick expresses his views. He likens it to a 'philosophical proving ground' for testing the ideas that the film's characters express (ibid., 170). Even though Malick's ideas are made explicit through voice-over and dialogue, they are ultimately couched in a broader *visual outlook*: Silberman claims that the film's final monologue, for instance, is backed up by 'luminous visuals' that 'provide an unmediated, nonverbal argument for the radiant splendor of the world and the victory of a faith in spirit...' (ibid., 174).

The ethical upshot of this, for Silberman, is that the film 'poses a challenge to our powers of imagination' (ibid., 173). Yet this conclusion only follows, in this case, from the sort of *spiritual sublimity* as the *effect* that he sees in Malick's treatment of nature. On Silberman's account, therefore, the film's contemplative method consists of bringing the viewer to 'a spiritual version of landscape': it uses verbal devices to name the issue of 'another world', but employs visuals of landscape to give us a sense of what this may actually be. Its transformational work consists of *cultivating our artistic imagination*, thus enabling a vision of the world that is open to possibilities of renewal and redemption.

Robert Pippin: Interrogative attention. Robert Pippin (2013) examines *The Thin Red Line* in terms of what he designates as the film's 'interrogative mode'. He sees this as a particular contemplative effect, channelled through two devices:

moving pictures of nature in combination with voice-over monologues. The former expresses an 'aesthetic interrogation', which is in counterpoint to the 'discursive interrogation' of the latter. On the basis of their overlapping functions Pippin is able to discern 'meditative' qualities in each of these devices (ibid., 249–250, 269).

As far as *transformational effect* goes, however, Pippin is mostly interested in Malick's 'almost devout concentration' on the natural world (ibid., 249). Pippin detects in Malick's images of nature a freedom and intensity that prompts in viewers a reworking of their *attention*. With this he illustrates how something like attention – or awareness – can double up as both the *domain* and *value* of an ethic of transformation: Malick's treatment of nature both *works on* our attention and helps bring it to and an *ideal mode* of 'interrogative' attention, as supposedly modeled by the film's own attentiveness. This, he says, can disclose for us an intuitive and pre-discursive dimension of meaning in things.

Voice-over

I now turn to what is certainly Malick's most recognizable stylistic device, his voice-over monologues. It is easy enough to see how this device makes for a contemplative cinema: it gives voice to characters' *contemplations*. Yet many commentators locate the essential contemplative appeal of Malick's voice-overs rather in its frequently *contrasting relations* with other stylistic devices. Carl Plantinga (2010, 91–99), for instance, argues that such juxtapositions produce experiences of 'affective incongruity' and 'ambiguity' that encourages in viewers 'a contemplative mode of film viewing'.

Steven Rybin: Self-Reflection and voicing meaning. It is not just that voice-overs facilitate a heightened reflection. Philosophers also see it as helping realize a value of enhanced *awareness*. One example is Steven Rybin (2011), who locates the philosophical functions of Malick's films in the general disparity that he finds between voice and the visual world. He sees Malick's characters as striving, heroically, to voice meaning over against the 'sensually dispersive' and 'inexhaustible' film worlds that they are subject to.⁹

This asks for some unraveling. Rybin's claim of a 'sensually dispersive design' is his version of what is often cited as the '*impressionistic*', '*elliptical*' or '*fragmented*' effect of Malick's style. And he derives this effect from how Malick presents his 'film world', which, as a device, again comes down to Malick's free-floating *depictions of nature*. Rybin refers to a 'dispersive array of natural imagery' which he characterizes as 'discontinuous', 'non-causal' and 'unmotivated within the diegesis' (ibid., 15). He therefore sees in Malick's voice-overs a striving to give meaning (words) and hold together these disparate impressions (images) of an ultimately inexhaustible nature (ibid., 30).

Rybin sees viewers as equally confronted by the 'sensually dispersive' effect of Malick's film worlds. They are thereby drawn into a similar process of

meaning-making, alongside the meanings voiced by the filmmaker's characters. With this Rybin looks to effects of *ambiguity* as the *method* whereby Malick's style draws viewers into a contemplative mode: this is because viewers have to contend with visual impressions of a world that are not readily intelligible and remain inconclusive; moreover, they have to evaluate them in light of the meanings articulated through voice-over. This process culminates around a particular *value of awareness*: it may instil in us a greater awareness of what Rybin describes as the 'phenomenological fact' of our own striving for meaning (ibid., 30, 38). Part of this awareness is the ethically significant recognition of the limitations inherent to our interpretations of the world. Rybin says of Malick's characters that their introspective voice-overs suggest an attempt at '*self-understanding*' (ibid., 28). This notion, it turns out, captures much of the transformational value that he imagines for the viewer.

David Davies: Self-reflection and embodied agency. I now turn to David Davies (2008b), who likewise breaks Malick's style down to an overall disparity involving voice-over. He argues that *The Thin Red Line* uses voice-over to the effect of creating a contrast between characters' *reflective thinking* and their depicted *actions* – the latter of which he accepts to be of an essentially *embodied* nature, seeing that Malick's opaque characters to respond to the world in 'a less deliberately mediated way' (ibid., 55).

Davies, however, recognizes that Malick's voice-over reflections, while standing apart from characters' embodied responses, represent a mode of human engagement in its own right. As he sees it, Malick's style thus urges the viewer to contemplation by staging two separate modes of human agency, side by side. The discursive thoughts in voice-over do not motivate characters' actions, nor do they explain characters' motivations for acting. But they do show how the characters reflect on their embodied engagements with the world (ibid., 60). Again, the claimed philosophical payoff of such a juxtaposition coincides with a transformative exploration of the self: Davies argues that this stylistic arrangement makes viewers more aware of the distinctness of *human* embodied agency from the rest of the natural world. Like Rybin, Davies poses a certain *awareness* as transformational value, which is directed at the domain of *our own experience*. By pairing characters' visceral actions with voiced thoughts, *The Thin Red Line* thus affords a *self-reflective insight* into the richness and complexity of this experience (ibid., 61).

Perspective effects

In my final case, I consider what is perhaps a more elusive feature of Malick's cinema, albeit a commonly cited one. It is not a stylistic device, but a broadly perceived *-effect*, which I roughly group together as the postulated 'perspective effects' of Malick's style. Philosophers are keen to explain Malick's approach, not only in terms of 'perspectives' (e.g. Macdonald 2008, 91–93; Manning 2011,

172; Sinnerbrink 2011b, 180–182) but also related notions like ‘points of view’ (e.g. Yates 2006; Coplan 2008, 72; Virvidaki 2014, 29, 31); ‘ways of seeing’ (e.g. Bersani & Dutoit 2004, 158–160; Davies 2008b, 50–53, 61–62; Pippin 2013, 273, 275); and ‘worldviews’ or ‘ways of knowing’ (e.g. Walden 2011, 197–198). It has to be said that these terms are not used with great clarity. They are often applied interchangeably, with philosophers disregarding potential differences between their literal and the figurative meanings or, for that matter, whether they refer to subjective perception or knowledge.

Critic Jon Baskin (2010) provides a paradigmatic account of this is effect. He proceeds from the understanding that Malick’s cinema foregrounds ‘perspective’ and ‘problems of seeing’ and therefore finds that it puts on viewers the transformational demand ‘to see in a new way’. He moreover pinpoints a ‘visual ethic’ in what he calls Malick’s ‘education’ of our perceptions: namely, for us to take on Malick’s overarching cinematic perspective that can reconcile opposing realities by showing us their common root (ibid.).

Robert Sinnerbrink: The perspective of nature. Robert Sinnerbrink (2011b) arrives at a comparable conclusion. He describes the philosophical ambition of *The New World* as an attempt at letting us experience an ‘impossible’ point of view. With this he posits what I take to be a global perspective effect, which he connects to a few related things. On the one hand, the film relates the imagined experience of the foundation of colonial America – a meeting of colonists and natives, the Old World and The New – which involves the ‘intensively subjective reflection’ of two contrasting points of view (ibid., 181). And Malick then knowingly looks upon this encounter, says Sinnerbrink, with the ‘romantic naivety’ of poetic myth, not historical fact.

But a further significant component of the film’s ‘impossible point of view’ is that it seeks to present a *metaphysical perspective* in which *nature* itself becomes something of an acting subject. As an observation on Malick’s style, Sinnerbrink does not here dwell on devices and concentrates more on its experiential effects like *awe* and *wonder* (ibid., 182). Yet it is worth noting that this sublimity of nature’s perspective, as he interprets it, consists of it being ‘*elemental*’, namely nature as ‘that which underlies and supports any form of historical human community (ibid., 192).’

The ‘mesmerizing philosophical meditation’ that Sinnerbrink attributes to Malick – the contemplative method, as I see it – hinges on the putting together of this ‘impossible’ melting pot of perspectives. In terms of ethical significance, Sinnerbrink takes this particular affective experience to be an obvious provocation to thought. But he sees in its poetic disclosure of nature’s ‘perspective’ also more particular value: it can reveal to viewers *new ways of relating to nature*. Most notable is Sinnerbrink’s claim that it brings us to an acknowledgement (read: awareness) of our deeper *unity* with nature; a unity that underlies and can overcome our cultural-historical oppositions (ibid., 190, 192). Sinnerbrink thus implicitly conceives an interlocking chain of transformational values: he

poses that the film encourages *awareness*, an awareness of *nature*, the content of which is our essential *unity with nature*.

Bersani and Dutoit: An erasure of perspective. This brings me, lastly, to Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's (2004, 124–177) widely cited meditation on *The Thin Red Line*. Bersani and Dutoit locate the main philosophical thrust of *The Thin Red Line* in a particular effect of perspective: they call this 'a certain kind of look', one that is 'wholly open', as enacted by the character Private Witt (Jim Caviezel). The film launches its 'visual argument', they say, by making us see *in* and *through* Witt's eyes (ibid., 2, 151, 158). This 'look' therefore relates to two stylistic devices. *Visual presentations of nature*, one the one hand, lets us see *through* Witt's eyes. Here, Bersani and Dutoit recall the same understanding of nature that Critchley advances – 'images of calm beauty... [that] represent the vast, non-human setting of *The Thin Red Line* as a mostly immobile, indifferent witness to the human agitations within it' (ibid., 159). But this is complemented by *close-ups on the face*, which moreover lets us see *in* Witt's eyes (ibid., 143–146). This device, say Bersani and Dutoit, reveals the character's perspective by showing us how his face registers the world. It is not a subjective perspective, involving psychological expression, but a perspective on the world, one which we see inscribed on the face of the looking subject.

In line with their patently antisubjective position, Bersani and Dutoit take Witt's look as defining an ethic of 'total absorption': it is devoid of subjectivity; it simply connects to the world and locates him within it (ibid., 160–161). With this embracing ethical attitude, Witt excels at a range of transformational values – most notable for Bersani and Dutoit are his *openness*, *receptivity* and *connection* with the community of all being. They construe Witt's perspective as fundamentally *surrendered to* and *involved with the world*. In this sense, Witt's look amounts to what is once more a 'perspective of nature'.

But how do Bersani and Dutoit relate these ethical exemplifications to the viewer? The contemplative *method* that they propose in this regard takes a lot for granted: quite simply, Witt's 'look' is a stylistic effect that intrinsically *involves* the viewer. Since Witt is often, in effect, looking *at us*, Bersani and Dutoit conclude that we, the implicated viewers, are called to *collaborate* with this look. It prompts us to emulate the same *values* of openness and connection that Witt so exquisitely models. One the one hand, this asks of us simply 'to let the world be' (ibid., 164). But the strong Deleuzian streak in Bersani and Dutoit simultaneously stresses our acknowledging the 'inescapable connectedness' whereby '*I am only in the world*' (ibid., 169). So while the general *domain* of transformation that they propose is that of *subjectivity*, they make the rather grand claim that this is a process whereby the individual subject *undoes its own subjectivity* – it loses itself in connection to the world and by dissolving into it.

So in Bersani and Dutoit's vision, we again have the conclusion that Malick's style helps bring home our essential *unity* or 'connection' to *nature*. Their ethical agenda boils down to a negation of individual subjectivity. Hence, the

perspective effects that they envision for *The Thin Red Line* calls the viewer to become a 'subject divested of subjectivity' and thereby gain the perspective that is 'an erasure of perspective itself' (ibid., 146, 164).

Some things about film-philosophy: method, value and assumption

With this meta-critical excursion, I have undertaken what could go under the banner of 'meta-hermeneutics' (Korthals Altes 2013, 37–39) – an examination of the interpretative paths that interpreters resort to, which in this case are the paths along which philosophers make sense of Terrence Malick's film style. I have shown that the philosophers take the same overall interpretative route, which is the notion of a contemplative style; but also that this route consists of many individual paths, each relying on a different configuration of stylistic devices and effects, as each philosopher sees fit.

The second movement of my analysis was to demonstrate how these diverse interpretative 'paths', as to the ethics that they imply, lead to much the same 'destination'. The philosophical intentions of the above cases are undoubtedly diverse. But their ethical overtones ring in clear harmony: all the cases converge around a general concern with personal transformation. According to this picture, Malick's cinema affords not only a *contemplative* encounter, but moreover an inherently *edifying* one. This message is most evident in philosophers ascribing to stylistic features the potential to achieve what I call 'transformational effects'. Such effects, we have seen, involve suggested *methods* whereby Malick's contemplative style is said to work on some *domain* within the viewer, in accordance with an ethically significant *value* that is thereby actualized.

By all means, one could go into a discussion on the validity of these claims about Malick's work and its effects – but it is not my aim to do so here. My own meta-agenda, rather, is to ask what philosophers' conclusions about Malick, as a local case, suggest about the procedures and presuppositions that go into the general project of film-philosophy.

To start with, the case of Malick affords an opportunity to play devil's advocate around the implicit *methods* of film philosophers. For example: if readers hope to get from these philosophers an exact explanation of *how* Malick's style links up with particular transformational effects, they will be left disappointed. The connections drawn between elements of style and transformational effects remain speculative and suggestive. True, the philosophers in question are not explicitly arguing for such transformational effects. But if you take away from their readings the connections nevertheless implied, little worth saying would remain. Hence, we should well ask whether their suggested connections between style and effect are in fact tenable. One response could be that these claims are hopelessly idealistic. Can elements of style – say, 'random images of rocks and trees' – *really achieve* the valued effects that philosophers say? The

implied contemplative methods that are thought to connect style to such effects often take much for granted – if they are even posed, which is not always the case. Or perhaps these effects have little to do with Malick's style, and instead come down to the adequacy of the philosopher-viewer's (contemplative, ethical) mindset?

There are also deeper questions to be raised about the whole business of 'drawing connections', before all else. Surely, as I have shown, the sheer range of connections made with different stylistic devices, and the sometimes contradicting interpretations of their effects, testify to the inherent *ambivalence* of these connections on which philosophers base their readings. So do philosophers not slip into a baseless exercise in *essentialization*, in which favoured stylistic devices get fixed (and, ultimately, reduced) to seemingly appropriate effects? This perhaps calls for the old Eisensteinian advice that all cinematic techniques should be treated as equal, and that the game of singling out cause-effect correspondences – whether implicit or not – is a precarious one to play.

Yet for me to demand from film philosophers to give greater empirical grounding to the style-effect connections that they pose – à la the devil's advocate above – would seem to violate the spirit of the philosophical readings considered here. I wish to propose a more charitable appraisal: we should rather see the transformational effects that philosophers connect to Malick style as acts of *value attribution*, in accordance with the field's broader impulse to value films-as-philosophy for purposes of *personal transformation*. As I have said earlier, I cannot pretend this transformational impulse is purely a desideratum of the philosophers. The films in question have to play their part. So, much as film philosophers are committed to this ethical interest, we have in Malick a special set of factors – a thoughtful filmmaker persona, his existential narrative obsessions, and most of all, it seems, the perceived effects of an evocative contemplative style – that markedly *enhance* their existing impulse unto transformational ethics.

But why is it that ethics of transformation, specifically, weigh in so strongly on the *kind* of value that philosophers see in films that do philosophy? One factor, as noted in the introduction, is the obvious affinities that exist between philosophy and aims of self-transformation. Another factor has to do with a growing uneasiness about interpreting the philosophical *meaning* of films, which is thought to 'impose' philosophy on film. As I see it, a current intellectual milieu dedicated to considerations of ontology, materiality, performativity, embodiment and affect, leads philosophers to rather affirm what films-as-philosophy *do*; and, more so, what such films *do to and for* us (cf. Rodowick 2007, 73; Rybin 2012, xvi). Hence, we find, as to Malick and beyond, that philosophers now pay more attention to concrete details of style, and the ethically significant transformations that these may evoke.

The hesitancy that I have about the cases considered here, however, is that the philosophical 'reflections', 'readings' and 'descriptions' of style and effect

do not sufficiently own up to still being *interpretations* (now not of meaning, but of what stylistic devices do) and *invested, value-laden* interpretations at that. Of course we should not – and, in fact, cannot – do away with acts of interpretation and value attribution. The problem, rather, is the inattention of film philosophers to their own interpretative interests, and how these interests impact on their evaluations of film style. A particularly telling instance is when their ideals of personal transformation gets allied with different normative *assumptions* of what it is (for films) to do philosophy. Such preconceptions of film-philosophy predispose these analysts to particular judgments of stylistic elements: the *kind* of transformational value that they find in Malick's style can be traced back to their guiding beliefs about what, in essence, constitutes film as philosophy. We therefore have a particular pre-interpretative interest, pertaining to what film-philosophy should be, that commits philosophers to a specific set of ethical interests, all of which govern the sort of transformational effect that they look for in a film's style.

These implications are well demonstrated by two prominent streams of philosophical interpretation that Malick's cinema attracts – an example with which I bring this essay to a close. These streams mark two essentially different paths along which analysts explain the contemplativeness, and philosophical significance, of Malick's style: one is led by a motive of Subjectivity, emphasizing how his style embodies and elicits reflective thinking (e.g. Rybin, Davies); and the other by a motive of Nature, giving priority to the world to which his style gives presence (e.g. Critchley, Bersani and Dutoit). They approach Malick's cinema from two fundamentally different commitments – what may be roughly called a commitment to the 'inside' versus a commitment to the 'outside'.

A range of issues follow from this. The respective commitments of the two interpretative streams, firstly, prompt in them different *prioritizations* of stylistic features. Both approaches, for instance, recognize the prominent place of nature in Malick's cinema. But they differ markedly in their evaluations of voice-over: whereas the likes of Rybin and Davies give ample attention to voice-over, and posit a tension between it and Malick's presentations of nature, Bersani and Dutoit, in contrast, either neglect or even explicitly trivialize the role of voice-overs in favour of what gets done by visual displays (see Bersani & Dutoit 2004, 132, 170–171).

More importantly, such pre-empted treatments of style correspond to ethical imperatives that likewise cater to the basic philosophical commitments of each approach. Consider, again, Malick's visual motif of nature, a reference point in relation to which each stream formulates its own direction of transformation. The first stream has an overall ethical orientation that *affirms subjectivity*. The second, quite the opposite, hopes for a *negation* or *loss of individual subjectivity*. This means that one approach will hold dear certain transformational *values* that the other will not. Nature-led approaches to film-philosophy are undoubtedly drawn to the value of *unity* (with nature), as it typifies the ideal of

a dispersed subject who escapes itself through its connectedness to the world. Film philosophers dedicated to a Subjectivity motive instead make appropriate the distinctness and separation of human experience, as it seeks meaning over against nature. Though it is not called as such, this suggests an esteem for precisely the opposite value – a certain *disunity*, which asserts the individual subject. At times, the two camps also happen to treat the *same value* in fundamentally different ways. Both streams of interpretation express an interest in the transformational value of *awareness*. But for one it is an awareness turned *inwards* – a heightened experience of self – whereas for the other it is an *outwards* awareness, aimed at reconciling the self's detachment from the world to which it belongs.

Notes

1. A host of philosophical articles, edited volumes and books attest to this. See Patterson (2007), Davies (2008a), Tucker and Kendall (2011) and Rybin (2012) as notable examples of recent books dedicated to Malick's work.
2. I therefore have no reason here to take up the long history of the fiercely discussed notion of 'style', which can be traced in a host of directions – whether Russian Formalism (such as *Poetica Kino*, the famous 1927 anthology edited by Boris Eikhenbaum), French New Wave criticism (like Alexandre Astruc's auteurist notion of the '*caméra-stylo*') or, more recently, Neoformalism (notably the 'historical poetics' of David Bordwell).
3. I quote Robert Sinnerbrink (2011a, 180): '... one of the most common ways to approach Malick has been from the viewpoint of philosophy. Indeed, Malick has recently been canonized as one of the few genuinely 'philosophical' filmmakers working today'.
4. Although there are some instances of meta-theoretical reflection on Malick, I am not aware of any vigorously systematic, critical attempts to this end, nor of any that specifically go into the philosophical interpretations of Malick's *style*. John Rhym (2010), for instance, details the initial shift in reception towards overtly philosophical treatments of Malick, particularly within the paradigm of Heideggerian philosophy. Martin Woessner (2011) takes much the same Heidegger-inspired angle on Malick's reception. David Davies (2009), to his credit, unpacks further characteristic philosophical approaches to Malick – Phenomenological, Deleuzian, Christian Theological, Transcendentalist – and provides a useful sample of their opposing interpretations of nature, as it emerges in Malick's work.
5. See Smith and Wartenberg (2006) and Sinnerbrink (2013) for useful introductory orientations on 'film as philosophy' as a field.
6. See Hannah Patterson's introduction to *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America* (2007) as a sample of this type of discourse.
7. The so-called 'slow films' of filmmakers like Tsai Ming-liang, Lav Diaz, and Lisandro Alonso exude a characteristic quietude that just as often prompts commentators to celebrate their 'contemplative-' or 'meditative' qualities. Yet, while there are similarities between Malick's oeuvre and slow cinema (e.g. importance of rural or natural settings), the differences between the two are substantial. Slow cinema, roughly speaking, indulges in long takes, static shots

and patient camera movements. It generally also avoids music, revels in silence and thereby draw attention to what would otherwise be unnoticed sounds in the diegetic background. Malick's work, in contrast, is much more inclined to sequences of impressionistic imagery on the basis of rhythmic editing and roaming camerawork. While Malick's narrative pacing may be slow, this does not play out in a slow image. His lively visual sequences are moreover often accompanied by voice-over narration, coupled with epiphanic orchestral music.

8. The 'late Malick', following critic Jon Baskin (2013), refers to the sequence of films that Malick released after his twenty year absence from filmmaking in 1998.
9. Rybin adopts Heidegger's notion of 'striving' as employed in his famous *Origin of the Work of Art* essay.

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